

FOREIGN AFFAIRS | Flora Lewis

Policy and Politics

The Washington Post
 The New York Times E 23
 The Washington Times
 The Wall Street Journal
 The Christian Science Monitor
 New York Daily News
 USA Today
 The Chicago Tribune

Date 18 Sept. 88

PRINCETON, N.J.

European officials, East as well as West, are unusually relaxed about American elections this year. They don't feel they have a big stake in the outcome, not because U.S. decisions are any less vital to them nowadays but because they don't expect much change whoever wins.

Despite the candidates' efforts to sharpen their profiles, foreign policy is not a major issue in the broad sense. That's one reason Vice President Bush keeps harping on "experience" rather than on anything substantive, although it comes a bit oddly from Ronald Reagan's running mate in 1980. They made no point of it then.

In any case, it's misleading. Mr. Bush has had a lot of foreign exposure, but that's not at all the same as grappling with decisions.

People who were at the U.N. when he was Ambassador there saw an energetically back-slapping lobbyist, which is a part of the job, but say he didn't seem well informed on U.S. plans nor did he try to influence them. Foreign diplomats who watched him in Beijing say he had no grasp of what was going on. And a Washington Post inquiry on the impression he made at the C.I.A. reported people who worked with him there saying that he never took a stand or made a recommendation when controversies arose.

It is true that with the exception perhaps of Latin America, U.S. opinion and circumstances have set the likely course of foreign policy for some years ahead. There will be negotiations with the Soviet Union and with America's trading partners, continued troubles in the Middle East, attempts to contain and if possible resolve regional conflicts. The options for Washington are narrow on these issues. There is no question of isola-

tionism or dramatic new initiatives.

A Republican President who takes care to assuage hard-liners might have an easier time getting new arms control treaties ratified, although the really hard ones will fight any agreements with the Soviets, and a Democratic President is likely to establish better working relations with Congress.

But the foreigners overlook two important points that influence policy.

One is Presidential style, not only in presenting issues to the public and in personal encounters with other leaders, but also in facing decisions. A large part of policy trouble in the Reagan Administration comes from leaving issues open, so that fights between the State and Defense Departments, for example, went on until events imposed the choice.

The other key difference is in the people whom the President names to carry out the policy. Mr. Reagan put an unprecedented number of political appointees in ambassadorial and ranking departmental jobs, many without government or foreign experience. The foreign service suffered considerably. Some nonprofessionals bring an incisive, fresh approach, others have made dreadful gaffes in recent years.

Gov. Michael Dukakis's big foreign policy speech last week was evidently

based on ideas articulated by Graham Allison Jr., dean of the Kennedy School at Harvard. Critics hinted that that smacked of plagiarism, but it's nonsense. Of course a President has to rely on advisers, and it matters that he choose knowledgeable and sound ones, not just slick media consultants. If Mr. Allison was an example of where Mr. Dukakis looks, he was a good one.

It would be interesting to know who advised Mr. Bush to use the line of attack blaming Mr. Dukakis for failing to attribute all the changes in the Soviet Union and the Communist world to the Reagan Administration. Mr. Dukakis has endorsed current Reagan policy on dealing with Mikhail Gorbachev, while Mr. Bush seems to be backing away a bit to please the ultra-right.

But of course Mr. Dukakis is right in analyzing Moscow's extraordinary shifts as the result primarily of Soviet internal problems and wise to show he understands the limits of U.S. influence. The facts are that Mr. Gorbachev's attempts at transformation are the cumulative result of two generations of general success in the West and undeniable failure in the East. Even Czechoslovak officials, the hard-liners of the East, now concede that central planning doesn't work and that the problem is how to reform it without getting into worse trouble.

Mr. Dukakis is right in pointing out that the defense budget can no longer be increased. It is "soft on defense" to try to solve all questions by throwing money at them. Now, the difficult choices, evaded during the Reagan buildup, will have to be made.

Naturally, foreigners don't see anything serious in a debate about pledging allegiance to the flag and counting diplomatic handshakes. □